



Indian Newspaper Readership and The Impact of COVID-19: A Case of *Dainik Bhaskar*

Akshat Seth

PhD Student, Centre for Media Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India

Received: 09 Apr 2023; Received in revised form: 10 May 2023; Accepted: 17 May 2023; Available online: 23 May 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— The following paper looks at the question of readership and the future of print in a post pandemic scenario. While keeping the broad framework of that future of print in mind, the paper looks at the journey of the newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar* which is one of the top five daily periodicals by circulation in the world. The effect of the pandemic on the newspaper industry in general and *Bhaskar's* particular response to it help us nuance the picture of the future of print through the lens of access to capital, resources etc. The question of diverging trends when it comes to newspaper readership in India and the world are also taken up.

Keywords— *Dainik Bhaskar*, periodicals, audio-visual, The COVID-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

Newspaper readership around the world has been perceived to be hit by the emergence of alternative means of entertainment and information rooted in the audio-visual medium, as well as the increased digitization that we now see all around us. While digital newspapers hold promise for the future, the format and genre in its print form which gives us the sense of touch and hence a physical materiality which does not seem ephemeral, seems to be dying out and being gradually replaced. The COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted newspaper supply the world over and led to a situation where newspapers lost revenues and advertisement on account of being closed for long periods due to the disruption in the supply chain. India, which has a unique system of newspaper distribution and supply especially, saw that system break down during COVID. However, many newspapers which are big publications have recovered and are seeing profitable turnovers for the present. While the long term decline remains on the horizon, for now, the free fall has been averted. *Dainik Bhaskar*, seen as the number one periodical newspaper in terms of circulation in India and within the top five of world rankings by circulation, is a case in point.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first theme that we are going to explore in this whole scenario is about the future of the printed word and its viability for coming generations.

Neuman (1984) introduced the technology of 'teletex' and 'videotex' to his readers; predictions for the integration of television and computer services to perform all the tasks that eventually internet managed to succeed in fulfilling. The age of proto-internet development in which Newman was operating could yet not foresee the radical use of technology that we see today, but nevertheless was on point about basic functions that the technology of online interaction could perform. As regards the history of print, the author predicted immediate disruption, but not total eradication of print by the digital. He rather foresaw a coexisting of the various forms of electronic and print media fulfilling different functions (344).

Provenzo (1986) also predicts disruptive effects of the then newly emerging microcomputers on various communication technologies including print which he relates to in the framework of Marshall McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxies*. While his predictions for print technology are sketchy, he devotes far more time on the

history of industrial revolution to try to make his point implicitly.

Birkerts (1994) talks not so much about the future of print but the future of reading practices. The overall thrust of his argument, which has been described as ‘grim’ and ‘alarmist’ by critics, remains on the fact that the ways of expression and knowledge gaining as typified by literature in print would altogether disappear with the coming of electronic reading.

Eisenstein (1995) fashions a sort of reply to Birkerts’ alarmism and moralism hidden behind the prophecy of doom and gloom in relation to print. By extensively drawing on historically ambivalent views in relation to print, and its associated professions such as media and journalism, Eisenstein reminds us that the skepticism towards disruptive technologies or indeed disruptive practices which change power relations within them, are nothing new.

Meadow (1998) thoroughly discusses the transformation of the printed word into the digital. Rather than engaging in grandiose judgments about the future of print, he looks at the micro-implications of the transformation. Digital libraries, integration between text and audio-visual media are some of the conclusions he makes. However, the nuanced argument also makes it clear that the printed word would not disappear altogether.

The future of print cannot be diminished to the rather remote possibility of a particular date being set for the publication of the last book or the printing of the last piece of newspaper, but rather to sum up the transformation, as Jay David Bolter puts it “print will no longer define the organization and presentation of knowledge as it has for the past five centuries” (1991, 2). Irrespective of the pandemic occurrence, we would still be living in what David Gunkel calls, ‘the late age of print’ (2003, 278). Thus studying print within the paradigm of digital perspective is par for the course.

When we talk about the future of newspapers in relation to the future of print, things that have to be kept in mind is that while the format of words printed on paper has lost traction, the ‘form’ itself remains, in a digital medium. Also, while developed countries have seen a long term decline owing to a much smaller population and the faster spread of alternative technologies, the global south has a different sociological and cultural relation to the newspaper. All that however was upended by the pandemic.

III. THE NEWSPAPER SCENARIO

The newspaper as one of the most consistent and penetrative form of print based mass communication has in the past

three decades seen a decline in circulation, particularly in the West which had popularized the genre in its modern form in the rest of the world as a result of the globalization of print technology abetted by colonialism. Figures from 2007 in the United States pointed to a 10% drop in the number of newspapers, 14.5% drop in readership and a narrowing of diversity such as the near total collapse of afternoon and evening papers compared to 1990 (Berkow, 2007, 71). Classified advertisements have been key to covering year-by-year rising costs for newspapers and their withdrawal has had a marked affect on survival. As media use has increasingly veered towards being digital, the pandemic only aggravated the situation. In the United States for instance, ad revenue declined 30% between 2019 and 2020 for print newspapers, even as the revenue for digital newspapers rose (Adgate, 2021).

While newspaper readership stagnation or decline has been a long term trend in advanced industrial societies, many countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa have bucked the trend with year-on-year growth in newspaper circulation and readership. Daily newspaper circulation in India rose from 9.3 million in 1976 to 40.3 million in 1996 (Jeffrey, 2000, 1). A quarterly analysis of the *Indian Readership Survey* in 2019 put the overall newspaper readership of India at 425 million people (Malvania, 2019). This was still not a majority of the Indian population, signifying a substantial untapped market still. The steady penetration of internet and digital media use has not substantially eroded print news readership.

While a generational shift is palpable even in India, in terms of the young largely shifting to the smartphone in order to get their daily dose of information, the medium of print still retains credibility in the eyes of the older generations. Newspapers may see a long term but slow decline as has been indicated in the last quarter of the Indian Readership Survey.

IV. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA AND ITS EFFECTS ON NEWSPAPERS

The COVID-19 pandemic was hence, an abrupt interruption of a complex network of newspaper circulation in India. Apart from circulation through newsstands, the distribution network relies on the delivery of the paper to readers individually in their homes. The central government announced a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020 resulting in heavy restriction on movement. Although, newspapers were classified under ‘essential services’, the paranoia of the virus led to housing societies and individual homes prohibiting the entry of vendors (Maitreyi, 2020); in many instances the police restricted movement for newspaper delivery (Staff, 2020). Prominent news

publishers assured readers the virus wouldn't be contracted by reading newspapers (Beareau, 2020). This did not remedy the situation as "circulation plummeted and advertising disappeared" (Ninan, 2021). While the more established companies closed down editions or subsidiaries (Dutta, 2020), several smaller periodicals folded up (NBT, 2020) (Upadhyay, 2020).

Those were a time of intense misery especially for the smaller newspaper owners, and many well established magazines such as *Nandan* and *Kadambini* closed down. The newspaper which lack a large corporate like structure to sustain themselves, or were "too big to fail" simply disappeared during the period.

V. THE STORY OF DAINIK BHASKAR

The scenario began to improve however when restrictions started to be lifted in June 2020- so much so that modest growth in ad revenues and clients could be recorded (Sen, 2021). It is in this context that *Dainik Bhaskar*, a major Hindi language daily newspaper reported that it had recaptured 90% of its readership by 2021 (Sarma, 2021). The newspaper, considered the fourth largest in the world and second in India by circulation and readership, started off as one of the many newspapers in the state of Madhya Pradesh in the late 1950s but is now part of a larger conglomerate which has diverse business interests such as shopping malls, and is particularly entrenched in Bhopal, the state capital, which it can be argued that the newspaper has come to symbolise and represent. Since starting its second edition in the nearby city of Indore in 1983, the newspaper's forward march sees it present in 12 states of India with sixty five editions. In absolute terms, that represents a gigantic readership base.

The fact that this newspaper has been able to bounce back from the pandemic with relative ease, is not only to do with the large pool of readership which it can cover but also early use of suave marketing techniques, much before others followed suit. In 1996 for instance, *Dainik Bhaskar* during its launch in Jaipur, the capital of the nearby state Rajasthan was able to displace *Rajasthan Patrika*- the dominant daily of that region, on the very first day. This was possible through the use of surveys, field research and offering discounts- practices hitherto unheard of (Munshi, 2009, 16). It was observed that *Dainik Bhaskar* has cemented its place within the state apparatus and establishment- it is said to be responsible for printing another government run paper which chiefly caters to job announcements and tenders. Hence, even as the newspaper got coverage for attracting government agencies' raids on its properties in relation to critical coverage of government handling of COVID, fundamentally didn't alter its

relationship with the establishment, but did give it the opportunity to acquire a hegemonic position by "playing it both ways" in a polarised media environment.

Dainik Bhaskar therefore represents a case where prior access to a large market and mitigating effects of financial resources at the disposal of the conglomerate can stand up to adverse changes, at least in the medium term. This is an era, where, as Herman and Chomsky note, "large media companies have diversified beyond the media fold and non-media companies have established a strong presence in the mass media" (2002, 12).

During my field work in Bhopal, it was pointed out to me readers aware of the practices of *Dainik Bhaskar* that the ability to penetrate homes through a distribution network and offering readers freebies and gifts at regular intervals are strategies *Dainik Bhaskar* employs to keep its reader base intact. It was also noticeable from the limited number of responses that *Dainik Bhaskar* occupies a hegemonic position. Views and observations on other periodicals are in relation to *Bhaskar* and even those who are critical of the paper concede that space.

VI. FINDINGS

The above formulation raises the following points about the correlation of print and disruptive events like the pandemic:

- ❖ The future of print newspaper can be affected, but not solely decided by deterministic notions of digital penetration or pandemic disruption.
- ❖ Factors like ownership, access to capital and the ability to use cutting edge marketing techniques can determine outcomes in case of such disruptive events.
- ❖ Some institutions in these cases can survive as a result of being part of a conglomerate, or simply being a brand- in sum, something "too big to fail".
- ❖ Reader responses to newspapers like *Dainik Bhaskar* could be nuanced and equivocal but are at the same time shaped by such entrenched commercial interests and soft power.

VII. CONCLUSION

Bigger corporations like *Bhaskar*, which although started out as one of the many print start-ups in an age when Hindi language print was flooding Bhopal but reached pinnacles by transforming into Media and then general conglomerates have weathered the storm of the pandemic quite well. Even as a lot of smaller publications sink or convert to online formats, those with access to established distribution networks and capital will survive. This is in line with the historical view that liberalization of the media industry

opens up the space for large corporate structures to monopolise production whereas smaller publications disappear for want of adverts and increasing print costs. Bhaskar is one such monopoly which has now become big enough to influence life in a prominent urban centre such as Bhopal.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adgate, B. (2021, August 20). *Newspapers have been Struggling and then Came the Pandemic*. Retrieved from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2021/08/20/newspapers-have-been-struggling-and-then-came-the-pandemic/?sh=42830aef12e6>
- [2] Beareau, E. (2020, March 27). *Covid-19 Outbreak: Science Says Newspapers are Safe*. Retrieved from The Economic Times: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/media/entertainment/media/science-says-newspapers-are-safe/articleshow/74836874.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
- [3] Berkow, I. (2007). What Future of Newspapers. *Creative Nonfiction*, 70-73.
- [4] Birkerts, S. (1994). *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Boston: Faber and Faber.
- [5] Bolter, J. D. (1991). *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- [6] Dutta, A. N. (2020, April 23). *Job Losses, Pay Cuts, Editions Shut- Coronavirus Triggers New Crisis for Indian Media*. Retrieved from The Print: <https://theprint.in/india/job-losses-pay-cuts-editions-shut-coronavirus-triggers-new-crisis-for-indian-media/407195/>
- [7] Eisenstein, E. L. (1995). The End of the Book? Some Perspectives on Media Change. *American Scholar*, 64(4), 541-555.
- [8] Gunkel, D. J. (2003). What's the Matter with Books. *Configurations*, 11(3), 277-303.
- [9] Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [10] Jeffrey, R. (2000). *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian Language Press, 1977-99*. London: Hurst & Co.
- [11] Maitreyi, M. L. (2020, March 25). *Many Apartment Complexes in Hyderabad Stop Delivery of Newspapers Fearing COVID-19 Spread*. Retrieved from The Hindu: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/many-city-apartment-complexes-and-gated-communities-suspend-newspaper-delivery/article31159976.ece>
- [12] Malvania, U. (2019, April 27). *Print Readership in India Jumps 4.4% to 425 Million in Two Years: Report*. Retrieved from Business Standard: https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/print-readership-in-india-jumps-4-4-to-425-million-in-two-years-report-119042700079_1.html
- [13] Meadow, C. T. (1998). *Ink into Bits: A Web of Converging Media*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press.
- [14] Munshi, P. (2009). *Making Breakthrough Innovation Happen: How Eleven Indians Pulled Off the Impossible*. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins India.
- [15] NBT. (2020, April 1). *कोरोना असर: मध्य प्रदेश में 300 से अधिक छोटे एवं मझोले समाचार पत्र छपने बंद*. Retrieved from Navbharat Times: <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/madhya-pradesh/bhopal/more-than-300-small-and-medium-newspapers-stop-printing-in-corona-bearing-madhya-pradesh/articleshow/74932331.cms>
- [16] Neuman, S. B. (1984). Teletex: Videotex: The Future of the Print Media. *Journal of Reading*, 27(4), 340-344.
- [17] Ninan, S. (2021, January 13). *Covid-19 Accelerates the Transformation of India's Newspaper Industry*. Retrieved from The India Forum: <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/covid-hastens-transformation-india-s-newspapers-advertising-collapses-and-digitisation-picks>
- [18] Provenzo, E. F. (1986). *Beyond the Gutenberg Galaxy: Microcomputers and the Emergence of Post-Typographical Cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- [19] Sarma, D. (2021, June 23). *Dainik Bhaskar Regains 90% of pre-Covid Circulation Numbers*. Retrieved from PrintWeek: <https://www.printweek.in/news/dainik-bhaskar-regains-90-of-precovid-circulation-numbers-54763>
- [20] Sen, I. (2021, June 14). *Newspaper Industry in India After the Second Wave of the Pandemic*. Retrieved from mxmindia.com: <https://www.mxmindia.com/2021/06/newspaper-industry-in-india-after-the-second-wave-of-the-pandemic/>
- [21] Staff, T. W. (2020, March 26). *Fear of Police, COVID-19 Hinders Newspaper Delivery Across India*. Retrieved from The Wire: <https://thewire.in/media/newspaper-delivery-coronavirus-police-lockdown>
- [22] Upadhyay, A. (2020, April 1). *मध्यप्रदेश: कोरोना की मार से 300 से अधिक अखबार बंद!* Retrieved from Navbharat Times: <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/madhya-pradesh/bhopal/more-than-300-newspapers-will-not-print-in-madhya-pradesh-/articleshow/74934039.cms>